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Civic Education Training Promotes Active Learning with Real-world Outcomes

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Cover Page Footnote
Becci Burchett and Michelle Paul are recent graduates of the University of Illinois at Chicago's Masters in the Art of Teaching History program. Both participated in the Civic Education Summer Institute in June, 2016.

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Why teach history? Do we teach in order to develop obedient citizens? Nationalistic citizens? Tolerant and informed citizens? As graduate students in the University of Illinois at Chicago's Master of Arts in the Teaching of History (MAT) program, our cohort discussed the rationale behind the subject. The teaching of history was often justified by the quest to develop active and engaged citizens. However, there was no agreement among educators about what good citizenship meant, and no good way to measure desired outcomes.

Although our graduate cohort was quite diverse, we recalled similar memories of our high school history classrooms. Many of our teachers actively avoided ambiguities and controversy in order to provide answers and control students. Our textbooks described ethnocentric, sanitized versions of history, and often spotlighted the United States as the international "good guy." The simplistic, happy portraits of history described in our high school textbooks bored everyone, even us history nerds. Simply reading our textbooks and regurgitating the names and dates for tests taught us to be passive bystanders bound to a predetermined destiny, not active citizens.

Thankfully, the teaching of history is moving away from the rote memorization of textbooks and toward the development of civic skills. Illinois' recent decision to require all students to complete a semester-long civics course brings us a step closer to measuring active citizenship. Typically harbored under the social studies umbrella, civics is now a stand-alone course. The state mandates that each civics course includes service learning, controversial conversation, instruction regarding government institutions and procedures, and simulations.

The Civic Education Summer Institute, hosted by Loyola University, equipped educators with the curriculum, strategies, and resources needed to foster active democratic citizenship in the classroom. With an intimate group of individuals seeking to increase their knowledge of the new course requirements, we found ourselves not merely learning about civics, but actually doing civics. The participants included both seasoned and brand-new high school teachers, professors, and civic and community leaders. The result was both practical and inspiring.

The two-day institute began with a riveting discussion on what building "active citizenship" truly meant and brought up important questions on how to assess this broad objective. While each individual had differing opinions based off of personal values, the

eventual consensus led to the reality that there was no singular, clear-cut definition. In fact, we concluded that responsible citizenship can come in many forms—donating items to a local food bank, organizing a food drive in your own community, or investigating and finding solutions to the issue of food scarcity—and all actions are vital and work together in harmony for the common good.

However, the unsettling truth is that "citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge and enthusiasm, in fewer venues and less equitable than is healthy for a vibrant democratic polity" (Sporte & Kahne, 2008, p. 739). And more so, this disengagement is especially pronounced for those with lower incomes (Sporte & Kahne, 2008). Thus, the introduction of a mandatory civics course was even more valuable and raised important questions on how to move beyond a traditional government or history course to produce active citizenship at a young age.

With this in mind, the importance of moving beyond a primarily content-based civics course became a vital goal of the institute. Rather than merely learning about the structure of government and the importance of exercising the right to vote, our goal as teachers should be to foster active democratic citizenship beyond the classroom walls. The climate of the civics institute allowed for hands-on practice in developing activities and strategies to use in the civics classroom. We deliberated on debatable topics, worked on campaigns to solve significant issues in the community, and took part in a simulation—all activities that could be done in the classroom and beyond. In fact, research shows that classrooms where students learn about topics of their own interest, discuss controversial issues and social problems, and form their own opinions on those issues are places where the seeds of democratic participation are planted (Sporte & Kahne, 2008). By creating an inclusive classroom in which global and community issues are respectfully discussed, students are engaged and able to take part in the broader community in a more meaningful way.

More than discussions and class simulations, the civics institute importantly encouraged educators to move beyond the classroom to promote student voice and action in the community. With this broader goal in mind, we were exposed to excellent resources and organizations that promote democratic action in students. By expanding civic education to community-based learning, students are able to get a real sense of what it means to be an active citizen. As Ehlrich (1999) points out, "When preparing for a lifetime of engaged citizenship, students need to integrate classroom learning with experiential learning in the larger world where practical political decision making and democratic deliberation occur" (p. 245). Ehlrich specifically points to the importance truly integrating service learning into the curriculum, not simply to get the required hours for graduation, but to create meaningful learning and foster active citizenship. The civics institute expanded on this notion and exposed participants to resources within Chicago Public Schools to promote student voice, and nonprofit organizations such as the Mikva Challenge. Service learning became more than something to check off the to-do list, and instead became a transformational experience that facilitated deep and meaningful learning.

The importance of civic education expands beyond the course itself, and can take place in any class across the curriculum (Sporte & Kahne, 2008). Preparing students to

actively take part in the world around them is not merely the goal of one class; it is the overarching goal of the school community. So if civic principles can be applied in any classroom, what are some tangible ways that we can put them into practice?

As history teachers, we believe that the best way to work towards developing an "active citizenry" is to help our future students develop their critical-thinking, problem-solving, and debate skills. These methods are a clear departure from our collective high school history experiences. Active citizenship requires active learning. In an active history classroom, textbooks are analyzed like any other historical document. Teachers should help students build critical-thinking skills so that they know to always question the text instead of take it as truth. Instead of covering what's in the textbook, great history teachers allow students to uncover history for themselves by providing various perspectives. By doing so, students can recognize the complexity and messiness of the past. This leads to ambiguities that require debate, analysis, and critical thinking. We know that history is subjective, and that decisions are made about what and what not to include in our national legacy. For this reason, providing various primary sources and perspectives is imperative.

Analyzing texts is one aspect of developing active citizens. When analyzing a text, we must teach students to consider the source and the context. A great case study for a high school history classroom is Abraham Lincoln and his debatable belief in racial equality. Students tend to have an idealistic image of Lincoln, gleaned from their typical American history textbooks. Of course, Lincoln lived within a different historical context, and was a politician who spoke to different audiences about emancipation. Because his words were intended for groups with varying beliefs, they seem contradictory and hypocritical. By today's standards, some of his comments are anything but progressive. However, students are able to unpack how we can't place the societal standards of today on people back then, and that Lincoln catered his message to his audience, just like politicians do today. Students are able to grapple with this material, and think contextually, delay judgement, and understand that Lincoln was a multifaceted human being whose ideas and beliefs evolved over time, just like ours often do today.

As we embark on our journey to teach history and social studies, we plan to fully integrate the techniques and resources we learned during the Civic Education Summer Institute. A great history teacher has the ability to deeply influence the way her students see and read about the past, opening new ways of understanding who we are and where we've come from. We have the opportunity to expand students' entire worldviews and encourage them to become active members in their own contemporary society. Through these methods, students can begin to understand that history has not been made by a few heroic individuals, but by everyday people who make everyday choices. Most of all, teachers can help their students understand that history isn't inevitable, that it can progress and regress, and that their choices today are in fact shaping history. Our young people are already part of our national story—but most don't realize it. By examining how previous generations of citizens grappled with the issues of the day, students see that they too have a role in shaping the events of our time.

References

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